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ABSTRACT

A group of human resource development (HRD) practitioners participated in an innovative session on managing culture in the e-workplace. The session objectives were as follows: (1) bring cultural patterns of the e-workplace to the forefront; (2) discuss the impact of culture on performance improvement in the e-workplace; and (3) share resources for stimulating change in the way people within e-organizations work. The participants, who worked in small groups of six HRD practitioners each, used Senge's Iceberg Model as a lens for viewing culture in their own organizations. They also engaged in reflection and dialogue about responses to the information technology (IT) challenges in their various organizations, resources for addressing the challenges more effectively, and needed research. The innovative session consisted of four phases as follows: (1) a brief introduction to the topic and the Iceberg Model; (2) application of the Iceberg Model to identify IT events and patterns of IT events and discover the commonalities among events and patterns of events across organizations; (3) replication of phase 2 but with a focus on systemic structures and mental models; and (4) an all-group discussion about insights gained from the first three phases and an overview of available resources and research on managing culture in the e-workplace. (Contains 29 references.) (MN)

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Managing Culture in the E-Workplace: The Practitioners' Perspectives

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This session engages human resource development (HRD) practitioners in analyzing organization cultures in their e-workplaces. Participants will consider how the cultures of their organizations are changing in response to information technology (IT). Exercises will focus on the four levels of systems thinking reflected in Senge's Iceberg Model: Events, Patterns of Events, Structures, and Mental Models. Participants will share resources for improving the culture in e-workplaces and identify research and resources that are needed.

Keywords: Culture, Information Technology, Needs Analysis

Session Purpose

As organizations grasp for alignment using the new information technology (IT) tools of business, many leaders find themselves adjusting to new ways of working. Kanter (2001) identifies the following essential questions for today's organizations: How should organizations change in order to succeed in a digital world? What should an organization's new ways of working look like for maximum impact on profitability, employee satisfaction, quality, innovation, etc.? This session will explore answers to these questions. The goals of this session are to

1. bring cultural patterns of the e-workplace to the forefront,
2. discuss the impact of culture on performance improvement in the e-workplace, and
3. share resources for stimulating change in the way people within e-organizations work.

Content of Session

In this session, participants will practice using Senge's (2000) Iceberg Model as a lens for viewing culture in their own organizations. Participants will also engage in reflection and dialogue about the responses to the IT challenges in their various organizations, about resources for addressing the challenges more effectively, and about needed research in this area.

Theoretical Framework

HRD professionals, who are responsible for managing and facilitating culture change in organizations, are increasingly challenged to help position their organizations within the new Internet Age economy. They interact with two important influences in the Internet Age: information technology (IT) and people. People create IT uses, and they also create the pathways for exchanging information within organizations. The way people interact with IT and other factors in accomplishing their tasks influences how the organization's work gets done and the outputs that result (Lawson & Sleezer, 2001; Van Buren, 2001). For example, organizations today are using new IT applications to move beyond providing stakeholders with information, to automate processes, and finally to transform them (Christie, 2001).

Many organizations initially viewed IT strategies as golden rings for repositioning their organizations. However, for many the initial challenge of getting hold of a golden ring proved easy when compared to the challenges of managing IT use for improving performance. "Taking full advantage of the potential of the Internet Age requires leaders to lead differently and people to work together in new configurations" (Kanter, 2001, p. 7). Because an organization's culture facilitates or constrains actions and interactions, culture change provides important leverage for performance improvement.

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Organization Culture

Researchers, scholars, and business authors have been enthralled with the concept of business culture (Clark, 1972; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Ouchi, 1981, Pettigrew, 1973, Sathe, 1983, 1985; Schein, 1985, 1989, 1990). Culture is a construct that has been viewed in various ways. It has been viewed as a manifestation of a leader's style of management (Petty, Beadles, Chapman, Lowery, & Connell, 1995). In addition, linkages have been drawn between various cultural dimensions and bottom-line performance (Denison, 1984, 1990, 1996). Culture appears to have deep roots in the mental models (i.e., in the assumptions and beliefs regarding expectations) that are held by organizational members about all organizational operations. Employees tend to build expectations based on their personal experiences, peer pressure, myth, gossip, and wishful thinking. In all likelihood, that will not change. But what can change is what people do with the result (Weick, 1995).

Denison believes that the mental models of organizational members are not totally transparent, but, instead, are manifest in expressed behaviors. Furthermore, they are expressed as behaviors and are, therefore, quantifiable. According to Schein (1999), culture matters because decisions that are made without awareness of the underlying cultural forces may have unexpected and undesirable consequences.

As technology provides new pathways for doing work, it also challenges "tried and true" management practices. How will organizations adapt? What will successful e-organizations look like? Today, some routines have begun to look different (e.g., on-line ordering, customer service, project management). However, the effectiveness of organization change initiatives has been estimated at only 10-20% at best (Ashkenas, 1995). Furthermore, Ardichvilli (2001) stated that the primary reasons for failing to accept new patterns of work provided by IT are an overemphasis on technology-based solutions and a lack of attention to the human component of the equation. The rate of failure in strategic change initiatives indicates that success variables have yet to be explicitly defined and/or internalized by leaders and employees (Boyett, 1995).

To be most effective IT changes must be integrated with an organization's core beliefs, processes, and practices. In essence, organizations are on the verge of needing a massive culture change—a change in the way work is done, performance is measured, and employees are recruited and retained (Meeder &Cude, 2001). Of course, while these changes are occurring, successful organizations must continue to operate as financially sound, innovative, and quality-driven business enterprises.

The shift required of leaders today is from looking at skills and process behavior to examining mental models (i.e., values, attitudes, and beliefs) of the organization and its employees (Lee & Zemke, 1993). This shift must begin with an organization's greatest asset: its people. Leaders are quick to talk about rapid change, but research suggests that less than 10% of companies desiring to creatively and productively implement new technology into their ways of work are successful (Boyett, 1995). Morrison & Schmid (1994) noted that implementing new ways of work requires education, people skills, clear communication, and incentives. In other words, culture change is a requirement for organizations that want to compete most effectively in the Internet Age economy.

Debates continue about how to leverage an organization's culture for success, how to develop it, and how to change it. Indeed, culture might be the most important variable for creating, supporting, and sustaining bottom-line results in today's new economy (Fisher and Alford, 2000).

Systems Theory

Systems theory is foundational to the HRD profession. Integrating systems with the researched-based knowledge of culture's impact on organizational performance (Denison, 1990; 1996), can help HRD practitioners consider effective organizational change strategies relative to IT's impact on the current mental models of work and performance.

IT provides a relatively new influence on organizational performance. Leaders value IT because it provides 1) many new options for action and 2) links among individual employees and among organization functions. However, the more variables and the greater the interdependence of variables, the greater the systemic complexity (Dörner, 1996). Humans often do a poor job of understanding complex systems (Dawes, 1988; Dörner, 1996).

Tools for understanding how variables interact to produce results can be found in the literature of systems thinking. One such tool is the Iceberg Model (Senge, 2000). Senge shows the frozen ice that is visible above water and the larger ice mass that is invisible below the water. The ice below the water supports the visible portion of the iceberg. In the Iceberg Model, visible events are like the portion of the iceberg that is above water. The patterns of events are just below the water. The systemic structure that supports the patterns of events can be found at a deeper level, and the mental models that support the structures are found at the deepest level.

Because organizational cultures include aspects that are visible as well as deeper aspects that are not visible, the Iceberg Model is a useful tool for exploring this construct. According to Denison (1996), beliefs drive behaviors. In turn, behaviors drive results. Therefore, it is practical to approach organization culture via its most direct dimension: how people act as captured in organizational events. Systematic reflection on such events can reveal patterns of events and the systemic structures and mental models that support them.

In summary, IT offers a new set of solutions that can help organizations function more strategically, while also employing the flexibility necessary to improve innovation, quality, employee satisfaction, and positive bottom-line results. Using IT to effectively produce business results requires changing to the technology that best enables e-organizations to do their work. This may be the easier change to make. Changing the internal processes of the organization to maximize the contribution of IT and human resources may be a harder goal to reach. "The narrow question: How do we structure our e-business unit? The broader question: How do we change our whole organization? The first is oriented toward presenting the best face to outside audiences. The second recognizes that the biggest challenge is inside" (Kanter, 2001, p. 169).

Most organizations literally have decades "of history baked into their cultures and processes. Technology and the Internet are not coded into their organizational DNA –at least not yet" (Christie, 2001, p. 45). HRD professionals who help guide organizations in culture change efforts can benefit from using a systems lens to reflect on the culture of their organizations. They can also benefit from discovering how culture changes in the e-workplace vary across organizations. Finally, they can benefit from knowing the available and needed resources and research.

Description of Format

Participants will form small groups of six. This session begins with a brief *introduction* of the topic and the Iceberg Model. Organization culture will be discussed, and questions of interest relative to the e-patterns of work will be posed to the group.

In the second phase, participants *apply* the Iceberg Model to identify events and patterns of events. After working individually to *reflect* on an organization's IT events and then patterns of events, participants then interact in small groups to *discover* the commonalities among events and patterns of events across organizations. We will compare the participant's responses to the events and patterns of typical organizations from Lawson and Sleezer's 2001 study.

The third phase will replicate the process of phase 2 but will focus on systemic structures and mental models. We will compare the participant's responses to the structures and mental models of typical organizations from Lawson and Sleezer's 2001 study.

The fourth phase will be an *all-group discussion* about insights gained from the first three phases (15 minutes). The discussion will also include the resources and research that are available and those that are needed.

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